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1. Hollyleaf's Sacrifice

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[image]

Warriors

Hollyleaf's Sacrifice

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A slender black she-cat lay crouched in the middle of a grassy clearing, shrouded in a thin layer of mist. The she-cat's pelt glowed with starlight, carrying with it the scents of all four seasons; the tang of leaf-bare, the green scent of greenleaf, the musk of leafall, and the sweet blossom of newleaf. Her dark fur ruffled like holly branches with each rise and fall of her chest as she slept against an enormous rock in the center of the steep-sided clearing.

"Hollyleaf. Hollyleaf, wake up," a strange, yet familiar voice echoed into the she-cat's ears, forcing her from her dreams and bringing her back to the waking world.

Hollyleaf blinked and slowly opened her eyes, surprised to find herself in the middle of the clearing instead of back in the ThunderClan camp. She arched her back and stretched her long legs, letting out a yawn before rising to her paws and gazing at her surroundings.

The moonlit night landscape reminded Hollyleaf of greenleaf, but something about it felt strange, as if she had awoken in the world of a dream. She gazed upward to find that she was sleeping beneath four large oak trees, surrounding the jagged rock in the center of the hollow around her. She had never been to this part of the forest before, and forgot how she came to be there in the first place.

"Hollyleaf," the same familiar voice of a she-cat mewed, "Welcome to Fourtrees, the place of Gatherings in the Old Forest." Through the

fog, a cat appeared from out of the shadows. The newcomer's blue-gray fur gleamed with the light of the stars as she padded towards the center of the clearing. She gazed back at Hollyleaf with ice-blue eyes, glittering like the stars of Silverpelt in the night sky.

"Fourtrees?" Hollyleaf padded toward the other she-cat until they were only mouse-lengths apart. "How did I ever manage to get here? Why am I not in my nest in the ThunderClan camp?"

The she-cat across from her tilted her head sideways, closing her gleaming eyes in sympathy and understanding. "You probably don't remember, do you? Many cats think they are dreaming when their time comes to join our ranks."

"What are you talking about? Who are you, anyway?" Hollyleaf's head began spinning with questions. Why was she at Fourtrees, and who was this cat welcoming her? She seemed so familiar, but Hollyleaf knew she had never met this cat before.

"You know my name," the blue-furred she-cat answered, "but you were born many moons after my life ended and I joined our ancestors in StarClan. I am Bluestar, former leader of ThunderClan before Firestar." Bluestar dipped her head in greeting. "Welcome again, to Fourtrees. You are in StarClan now."

"So you are Bluestar," Hollyleaf murmured. Suddenly, she began to remember everything that had happened prior to now. She had taken part in the battle against the Dark Forest, against the cats who were denied access to StarClan at the time of their deaths and sent to a realm of eternal darkness. Somehow, they had managed to return to the land of the living in an effort to wage war on their former Clanmates. The malicious Dark Forest cats sought to destroy all those who lived after them, and claim control of the Clan territories surrounding the lake where the Clan cats made their homes.

The battle was like none that had ever preceded it; never before had cats from the land of the dead returned to fight with those in the land of the living. Hollyleaf vividly remembered the chaos of the battlefield which took place across as four Clan territories surrounding the lake. The air was filled with screeches and cries of

battle and the ground became stained with the blood of wounded and dying cats. Hollyleaf trembled at her own memories, as if just the thought of the Great Battle made her feel like she was reliving it all over again.

"It's all coming back, isn't it?" Bluestar meowed, disturbing Hollyleaf's thoughts and bringing her mind back to the present. "Cats who recently arrive in StarClan tend to forget what happened to them and how they arrived here. As you are now well aware of, you are not here because you are dreaming. You are here, Hollyleaf, because you died."

The dark-furred she-cat nodded her head in understanding. During the battle with the Dark Forest, she had given her life to save her Clanmate, Ivypool. The young silver and white tabby she-cat had been grappling with the Dark Forest Warrior, Hawkfrost. The dark-brown tabby tom was just moments from killing Ivypool when Hollyleaf jumped in between them. While fighting Hawkfrost, Hollyleaf received a fatal claw wound to the neck and bled to death before any of the medicine cats could heal her with medicinal herbs. The last thing she remembered was her spirit ascending from her body and following the other StarClan cats as they left the ThunderClan hollow.

"Yes, I remember now," Hollyleaf murmured. "Many cats gave their lives in the Great Battle, but at least the war was won by the living Clans."

Bluestar gestured for her to sit down, and both she-cats curled their legs under their bellies and tucked their tails in beside them. The former ThunderClan leader's muscles rippled beneath her pelt as she lowered herself to the ground. Her thick, blue-gray fur ruffled with the gust of a slight breeze as she parted her jaws in a large yawn. "Well, young one, normally one of the first things a new StarClan warrior does is explore the territory," Bluestar began, "but after all the fighting, I just want to spend a moment and recover from what has happened. I lived many moons before the Clan cats came to the lake, and I even have never seen anything like this before."

Hollyleaf knew that deep down the older she-cat was still grieving for her former medicine cat, Spottedleaf. The small tortoiseshell was

a StarClan cat before the battle, and though she was a spirit, her throat had been torn out by the Dark Forest cat, Mapleshade. Spirit cats of StarClan and the Dark Forest could be killed again, but then their spirits would fade away forever. This fate became of poor Spottedleaf.

"I miss Spottedleaf so much already," Bluestar mewed as if she had read Hollyleaf's mind. "You must miss your brothers and your parents... Life in StarClan is perfect; your paws are as light as the wind, and there will always be enough prey. You will never have to worry about another cold leaf-bare or sickness ever again... but you also have to leave the ones closest to you. Do you regret coming back to ThunderClan, only to give your life in battle so soon after returning home?"

Hollyleaf was nearly stunned at the she-cat's blunt question. Still, her answer was firm and confident. "I have no regrets, dying the death of a true warrior," she purred. "I did what I had to so that I could save Ivypool's life."

Bluestar gazed down at the ground, as if she could see something invisible to Hollyleaf. "In the living Clans, Ivypool has regrets," the former Clan leader sighed. "She told her sister, Dovewing, that she wished she could have died in your place. Ivypool blames herself, especially since she was once one of the living cats secretly training in the Dark Forest."

"But she turned against them as a spy, risking her life to give us the information we needed to foresee the attack coming," Hollyleaf shifted her paws uneasily, hoping to defend the Clanmate whose life she saved. "She was just as much of a Dark Forest cat in the end as I was! How could she ever wish our places had been exchanged?"

Bluestar flicked her tail back and forth and gazed into Hollyleaf's eyes. "Your response surprises me. I died a leader, a mother; nearly as an elder. I lived a long life, and was ready to willingly give it in the defense of a Clanmate. To be so young, and yet possess the same belief makes you a noble cat. If there were more warriors like you, there would be no Dark Forest. No traitors or murderers. If there were more warriors like you, then you would have been able to live a full life."

There was some truth to what the wise cat said. From the moment Hollykit was made an apprentice, she dedicated her life to the warrior code; she made it a priority to always abide by the laws set down by the countless generations of warriors that came before her. It was true that if more cats lived by the warrior code, then there would be no need for unnecessary battles and unnecessary bloodshed like that of the Great Battle.

Hollyleaf thought back to all she had left behind. She left behind her two brothers, Lionblaze and Jayfeather. She had barely been back in ThunderClan long enough to see her mother, Leafpool, and never got to say a proper goodbye to her father from WindClan, Crowfeather.

She would miss her adopted mother and father, Squirrelflight and Brambleclaw, immensely. Though they were not her real parents, the two raised her since her birth. Most of Hollyleaf's life, she and her brothers were made to believe they were their kits. Leafpool was a medicine cat, and Crowfeather was from another Clan. According to the warrior code, they were forbidden from having kits together. And yet they did. Hollyleaf was so ashamed of her very existence that she tried to leave it all behind by fleeing into the tunnels in ThunderClan territory. She couldn't live with the fact that her entire life had been a lie.

It's okay, Leafpool. I don't mind. I'm glad I came back to ThunderClan. I couldn't bear to... to leave without getting to know my mother. Suddenly Hollyleaf remembered her dying words to her real mother. Since she returned to ThunderClan, she had been nothing but bitter towards her real and adopted parents. Inside, Hollyleaf had still blamed them for her birth and the lies that broke the warrior code.

"You're right, Bluestar," the black-furred she-cat meowed as she turned her head to gaze up at the four massive oaks towering above her head. She could almost see the tops of them, even through the light mist surrounding them. "I did leave behind many things," Hollyleaf continued, glancing back into the eyes of the cat sitting across from her. "But in my short life, I was given so much more than I could ever have hoped for."

Bluestar tilted her head sideways in confusion. "What do you mean?

I always thought you despised your parents for their betrayal of the warrior code and felt anger toward Brambleclaw, now Bramblestar, and Squirrelflight for lying to you since your birth?"

"But because of what they did, I was able to have more than even some of the elders in their long lifetimes. I had two parents who loved me, a brilliant medicine cat and a brave WindClan warrior. I am now also the daughter of ThunderClan's leader, and Squirrelflight will always be like a second mother to me. She and Leafpool are sisters, after all." Hollyleaf could no longer contain her overflowing happiness for the life she left behind. She rose to all fours and leaped to the top of the Great Rock, the large boulder between the four trees around her.

"My brother, Jayfeather, is one of the greatest medicine cats to ever have lived. He was blind from birth, but that did not stop him from becoming the best healer he could possibly be. And Lionblaze fought with the strength and fury of a lion in the battle against the Dark Forest. I had so much to live for, and in the end, that gave me even more to die for! I am glad to have been able to know all the cats I did, to love and be loved by those around me. I could not be more proud of giving my life for such a worthy cause."

Bluestar purred from where she sat at the base of the Great Rock. "It looks like you didn't need me after all," she meowed as she rose and gazed up at Hollyleaf with satisfaction.

"What do you mean?" The younger she-cat asked as she sprung down into the soft grass below.

The former ThunderClan leader's serious tone began to fade from her eyes. "Honestly, I came here thinking that I would have to snap you out of self-pity... but here you are, speaking to me with these powerful words..." Bluestar padded forward until she was nose to nose with Hollyleaf. "I was sent here because like you, I died the true death of a warrior. For many moons, I felt betrayed by StarClan, betrayed by my Clanmates, and I despised the world because I thought they had all turned their backs on me. Even Firestar..."

Hollyleaf was stunned silent, lost for words as Bluestar continued.

"All because Tigerstar, my former deputy, betrayed and attempted to murder me and take control of ThunderClan. For moons, I was consumed with rage, hatred, and self-pity. But then, the moment came when I realized that I was never abandoned to begin with. Firestar gave me courage, and helped me to trust in StarClan once again. In the end, I too sacrificed my own life for the sake of ThunderClan, to save Firestar's life. You have already learned, as I have, what it means to be strong. We have both made the ultimate sacrifice, and it has made all the difference. Because of you and the many other warriors who gave their lives in the Great Battle, the Dark Forest has been defeated.

Hollyleaf bowed her head in gratitude at the words spoken by her elder. She felt honored to be complimented so highly by one of the greatest warriors in ThunderClan's history. She could not have been happier with returning home to her Clan and sharing her final days among those she loved. "Thank you, Bluestar," the she-cat dipped her head in respect. "You have helped me to remember how precious each life is, no matter how long or short."

Suddenly, Hollyleaf remembered a promise made to her by an old friend. She stared down at her paws, realizing in sadness that his promise to her would now be broken. "There's only one thing I wish I could have done before I died," the dark she-cat murmured.

"What is that?" Bluestar asked, again tilting her head curiously.

"I wish I could have seen Fallen Leaves again..." Hollyleaf thought back to when she had run away from ThunderClan, and how she had been trapped inside the tunnels on the edge of ThunderClan territory. She had almost been buried alive when the tunnel walls around her collapsed, but instead was left stranded with a broken leg and no one to help her. That was when Fallen Leaves appeared.

The sleek, ginger and white tomcat was nothing more than a wandering spirit who had drowned to death when the tunnels flooded many seasons ago. Fallen Leaves was an ancient cat, a distant ancestor of the warriors living around the lake. To become a Sharpclaw, the equivalent of a warrior, he was tasked with traveling through the tunnels inside what was now ThunderClan territory and surviving. Unfortunately, heavy a heavy rain came and

filled the tunnels, preventing Fallen Leaves' escape and forcing him to drown. His spirit had been forced to reside there for many moons after his death, as if he was being punished for his failure.

Fallen Leaves found Hollyleaf in the tunnels and helped her, feeding her fish from the underground river and providing her with bedding so that she could rest until her wounded leg healed. The two cats had spent moons together exploring together underground, and had grown very close to each other. The last thing Fallen Leaves promised Hollyleaf before she left to return to ThunderClan was that he would see her again, but that would never happen now that she had moved on to StarClan.

"I think the least we can do in StarClan is grant you your last request," Bluestar interrupted Hollyleaf's thoughts. Before she could ask the former leader meant, a shadow appeared from within the fog surrounding them. The figure approached slowly until the mist parted and finally, a cat stepped into the clearing beneath Fourtrees.

Hollyleaf gasped in shock as she locked eyes with the small tom. It was Fallen Leaves! Somehow his spirit had managed to leave the tunnels of ThunderClan and meet her here in StarClan! "Fallen Leaves!" The dark-furred she-cat rushed forward and buried her nose in the spirit cat's glimmering fur. "I thought you told me you could never leave the tunnels? How did you ever manage to come to StarClan?"

The newcomer purred and licked Hollyleaf's forehead. "I made a promise to you, didn't I? I left the tunnels to help the Clans fight against the Dark Forest, now that my spirit is finally free at last. I was devastated when I found out that you were killed, and traveled all the way to StarClan to fulfil my vow to you. We may have different ancestors, and walk in different skies... but no matter how far away you are, I will always be able to find you."

The she-cat purred and licked her friend's shoulder. "Thank you for coming back to me... Now, my spirit can finally be at peace as well."